Unmasking Male Privilege

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In 1991 several of us founded a fly-by-night organization: the A.C.L.U. (Always Causing Legal Unrest). Now, we don't mean to be confused with the American Civil Liberties Union! It's only a coincidence that our acronyms are the same. We're NOT that group that supports the pornographers, the Nazis, the KKK, the tobacco industry, and the child pornographers. We're NOT those guys fixated on reciting defamatory, whining mantras about Andrea Dworkin. Instead, our ACLU is concerned that conservative values such as corporate trademark laws, private property rights, and individual privacy (as opposed to public safety and welfare), severely infringe upon and limit free expression, and they *enjoy* more rights (legally, socially, and politically) than women do in the public and private domain. Our motto is "We tear into sexism." And we do. We don't let laws of any kind get in the way of our free expression. No siree. That summer in Bellingham we went on numerous crime sprees. Since that time the ACLU has decorticated many copies of Bret Easton Ellis' novel, *American Psycho*, and other books that were "asking for it."

In July, I was arrested at the Mt. Baker Theater during a showing of the movie *Kill Me Again*. I was the one hurling candy at the screen during the sexually violent scenes. When they found out I was in the audience, rather than dealing with me, the theatre manager refunded everyone's admission. I returned the next night and they attempted to prevent me from entering. I went in anyway, bought two big boxes of Sugar Babies, and by the time the police arrived, I was already pelting the candy at the screen. The movie is about an "attractive" (of course) woman who pays to stage her own murder. She becomes sexually aroused in a cheap motel while a guy pours a gallon of blood over her semi-nude body while she coos, "I've always wondered what it would be like to die a *really* violent death." Then he stuffs her body into the trunk of a car. In the end, she dies. And nobody really cared, not even me. You know the plot: The bitch wants it, she deserves it, and in the end she gets it—with lots of violence, sex, blood, and car crashes to exercise the adrenals and other organs. The satisfaction I got from my Sugar Baby bombings, and the clatter they made when they bounced off the screen onto the linoleum floor, was well worth the night I spent in jail for that one. Charges were quietly dismissed after I left Bellingham.

I was also arrested for tearing up $11.00 worth of *Esquire* magazines. For this one I spent 23 (count them hatch-mark-on-the-wall style) days in the Whatcom County jail. The theme of *Esquire* that month was, "Your Wife: An Owner's Manual." Need I say

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more? My jailers would not release me on my own recognizance unless I agreed to abide by all the laws—everywhere. Because of my commitment to fighting pornography and inequality with civil disobedience as political resistance, I would be hard pressed to make any agreement of that sort. Besides, as I told the prosecutor, he was kidding himself if he thought he could control me outside Washington. I was held there until the "authorities" finally realized that I would never comply, and then they threw me out of jail. The headlines in the local newspapers read: "*Feminist Thrown Out of Jail*." The article read: "Yes, Nikki Craft has been thrown out of a lot of places before, but never before has she been thrown out of jail. . ."

The high point of this action came at an unexpected time. By the time I went to trial I was exhausted. I was relieved when author and scholar Diana Russell arrived in Bellingham to testify as an expert witness. She was fresh energy with a clear, radical analysis to offer as a guiding force.

Earlier that year, Lucy Colvin, Sharon Black, Steven Hill, Darcy Alexandra, Chad Knuckles, Sharon O'Connell, and I donned ski masks and converged on the downtown Masturbation Service Center (Great Northern Books, a local pornography shop). Throughout July and August, we stood, for hours at a time, photographing hundreds of men (and one or two women), who entered the porn shop. Those of us who took part in this community experiment were all dedicated activists who have always taken individual responsibility for our work, words, and deeds. Some of us wore the ski masks because we feared for our personal safety. But we had other political points to make, too.

We did it because we believe strongly that men supporting the pornography industry must be publicly identified—whether they are our nextdoor neighbors, sexual harassers, prominent citizens, or convicted predatory sex offenders.

We took the photos with the intention of publishing them in our free speech leaflets. Several leaflets were published and posted throughout Bellingham. We gave these customers the public recognition they deserved for being porn users. The color photos are now framed and waiting to be included in an art exhibit called "When the Viewer Becomes the Viewed." We have yet to find a gallery willing to display the prints.

Neither the hordes of porn shop goers, First Amendment Liberal Fundamentalists, nor the local newspaper *The Bellingham Herald*, exactly jumped to defend our First Amendment Rights to publish our little newsletter. In fact, they tried in every way they could to stop us and even tore our posters down. The local newspaper censored and misrepresented us.

Men in the community harassed us on the street. Several, including Robert Sensarnie from Mission Beach, British Columbia, and one Christopher John Shelly from Everson, Washington, (a nudist and now convicted child molester) physically assaulted us. Both were found guilty of assault in separate trials. In the police report, Sensarnie said he attacked one of our demonstrators because he was upset that he was being photographed. In court, Sensarnie claimed the reason the assault took place was because I supposedly yelled at him, “Fuck you, nigger.” I would never use that racist language. There were witnesses that will attest to the fact that Sensarnie lied in court that day.

Edward Ross, the same judge who sentenced me to 90 days in jail for ripping up four *Esquire* magazines, gave Sensarnie no fine and a suspended sentence for assaulting women. As Sensarnie left the courtroom, he was smiling and gloating. There was no media coverage of either the assaults or the trial. In fact, even though we had been physically assaulted by these males in front of the porn shop, *The Bellingham Herald* would not allow me to write in an editorial that “some of [them] are dangerous.” I was also not allowed to say that some of them were “prominent citizens.”

These days it’s often difficult to tell if the media is being stupid or malicious, but in Bellingham that summer we encountered plenty of both. *The Bellingham Herald* ran one article and one editorial about our actions that did a real disservice to the community by misinforming them about our work and our intent, thereby threatening the safety and well-being of our group. The editors trivialized our work in an attempt to diminish our credibility because we chose to mask our identities for this particular action.

The Herald ran one editorial called “Credibility Lacking,” where the editor (who was not individually identified) lambasted our tactics, calling us “shadowy figures” who refused to be identified. (It was well known within the community who most of us were because of our past involvements.) After we stated that we feared retaliation, one *Herald* reporter published our names anyway. In the same article, he respected the anonymity of the manager of the porn store. They have refused to allow us to identify the owner of the store in an editorial.

The article (about our demonstration on July 3, 1990) called “Women Harass Customers of ‘Adult’ Store” should have been more accurately titled “Men’s Porn Shop Associate Assaults Anti-Pornography Activist.” That day, Chris Shelly, a man identified by the manager of the porn shop as one who “does things” for the store (according to police reports, he was allegedly a dildo repairman), chased Sharon O’Connell and me down the alley behind the porn shop. He caught Sharon, furiously yanking off (and stealing) her ski mask from behind, pulling her hair in the process, and trashing her leaflets. Our experience with Shelly corroborates the testimony of Amy, Ginny and Ryan (the children

he photographed and molested). We all know Shelly to be a male who resorts to physical force and violence to get what he wants, because he did it to us.

In the police report, he lied, claiming we were “closing in on him”—though no demonstrator was standing closer than twenty feet away when he began chasing us. There were many witnesses, so he ended up pleading guilty to assault charges. Then, a little over a month later on August 12, 1990, Shelly was again arrested, this time for child pornography, child molestation, and rape of a child, for an incident that took place at the local nude beach.

We were surprised to learn that in one discussion several police officers postulated that criminal charges (for assault) should not be pressed against Shelly. The police justified Shelly’s attack because he had been enraged that he was photographed. Others in the community took this same view as well.

For years I have confronted voyeurs and nudist men photographing unclothed women and children at nude beaches, Naturist Society and American Sunbathing Association events. I have also challenged individual men all across the country who were buying pornography at stores where we demonstrated.

During the Bellingham action I was struck by the fact that the type of men who were in front of the porn shop bitching and complaining about how we didn’t have the “right” to take their picture because they were entitled to their privacy, were the same type of men I had been encountering at the naturist/nudist events for years. These nudist men argued that if a woman had her clothes off on the beach, which was a public place, anybody (read any *man*) who wanted to take her photograph had the “right” to do so, even if the woman objected. The arrogance of these men, the hypocrisy of their actions, and their male-supremacist political position is appalling to behold.

Men take for granted their right to be unexposed. When they go to leer at images of women at the porn shop they want no one to violate their privacy. It’s even considered a social *faux pas* for men to look at each other once inside the porn shop. Our demonstrations intentionally violated a near sacred totem by shining a spotlight on these men, their behaviors and their habits. We wanted to create for them the opportunity to experience what it feels like to be psychologically invaded—not a comfortable feeling to be sure, but certainly no justification for physical assault.

We also wanted our masked presence to serve as a reminder to the community that women are often sexually violated by men who maintain their anonymity, some by wearing masks just like the ones we are wearing.

There is also a certain kind of justice in usurping from rapists and other sex offenders such a fierce symbol as a ski mask, usually reserved for the male domain, in order to yank these men from their anonymity and hold them publicly accountable.

We felt some vindication and pleasure by turning the tables so that men can experience the feeling of being vulnerable, exposed and threatened, albeit in a minuscule dose. In fact, we realize it will take much more radical actions, and more of them, to explore these various possibilities. Women's experience of being vulnerable, exposed, and threatened are far too common in their day-to-day existences and with few exceptions women's experiences of fear and restriction are unfathomable to men.

The very concept of privacy is nearly inconceivable to many women. The spread-legged images of women inside the porn store certainly allow women no privacy. In fact, the voyeuristic "turn on" of most pornography depends on the violation of women's privacy. Out on the street, many women unfortunately do not assume they have the ability, much less the right, to even go to the bus stop without being visually or verbally assaulted.

The "Unmasking Male Privilege" action was an inspiring, rejuvenating experience for all of us involved. It is particularly appealing because it afforded us our anonymity while exposing the real perpetrators. We urge other anti-pornography activists throughout the country to try it and examine some of the related possibilities. But it is not an action to take part in without plenty of forethought. Make sure there are at least five women present before you try this tactic in your community.

Photographing these men was stressful and confrontive on a level like no other action I have ever done before. On many levels, the repercussions can be awesome and the immediate hostility of the male patrons will be shocking to the experienced and inexperienced alike. One hour on the streets with your camera in hand and your mask in place, and you will get the point: this action exposes the patriarchy by getting right to the crux of the issue.